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THE FOUNDATIONS OF RELIGIOUS BELIEF

A SYMPOSIUM

My starting-point, of course, is the trustworthiness of the testimony of my nature in what it compels me to accept without reasoning. It is only on this assumption that we can have any reliable data for thought, or that our very processes of thought can be depended on. Assume that our intuitive and necessary ideas are not worthy of trust, and all certainty in science and philosophy, as well as in religion and theology, is swept away, and all search for truth and reality is vain. So far as our intuitive knowledge has to do with our present living, it is found practically reliable. We may well believe, then, that when our natures have feelings and longings which have to do with morality, religion, and what is beyond present verification, they give true testimony. Besides, we cannot believe that our natures, which recognize truth as a supreme obligation, can have a constitution so false as to make their primary impressions delusive.

In this way we have an assured basis for natural theology. But we cannot from this ground alone reach an answer to all the questions which have to do with God, immortality, and destiny. On some the light is dim, and on others it altogether fails. Is it possible for us to be assured of truth which is beyond the limits of our powers, perhaps beyond the limits of the powers of any who have not had a special experience or a special knowledge of truth in some other way?

All men do have an ability to recognize truth which transcends their experience or power to think through for themselves. Were it not for this principle, no one could be taught anything in any branch of knowledge so as to be certain of it. But we can be made certain through this power of discrimination, and broaden the area of what we accept as established. But even the reliable knowledge gained in this way, reaching out far beyond what we can be sure of through our individual experience and thought, falls far short of satisfying the demands of our natures, as the voice of conscience and our constitutional cravings bring us into relation to these tremendous

questions of God, immortality, and destiny. The question still remains: Is there any way by which we can be sure that teachings which avowedly answer these questions can be trusted? Can we step up from the narrower and lower ground of natural certainty to the higher and broader ground of supernatural authority?

In treating this question, I begin with our Lord. There is no way to explain the portraiture given of him, and the teachings attributed to him in the gospels, except on the ground that they are the records of a real life and substantially true. So far as our power to recognize the truth in teachings beyond our ability to elaborate extends to our Lord, his teachings are admitted by all candid students to transcend all ever given by others. Having taken this step with assurance, must we not take another, and be certain that a being such as he is declared to be in the gospels, who is able to give forth these peerless teachings, can be trusted both to know who he is and what is the source of his surpassing power as a teacher, and to tell the truth if he speaks at all? I cannot logically stop short of this position. I can then search his statements, and I find that he did assume that both by nature and endowment he was an authoritative teacher whose word was final on all questions on which he spoke. I can, then, not only believe that teachings which are all true to the utmost limits of my natural power to recognize truth will be true when they go beyond them, but I can take the step up from the ground of natural certainty to that of authority.

But if our Lord was an infallible and authoritative religious teacher, he must not only himself have been able to give us reliable religious teachings on all that is fateful for our souls, but he must also have been able to give just as infallible a judgment on the teachings of others. I can, therefore, accept his estimate of the religious instruction of the Old Testament. He also promised to his disciples a special help of the Spirit which would qualify them to complete his own teaching by adding to it what they were unprepared to receive before his death. We cannot believe he would have made this promise unless he knew it would be fulfilled. The New Testament writers professed to have received this power, and assumed to instruct with corresponding authority. It is noticeable that all the Scripture writers who gave forth truth in advance of their age, if not of all the ages, claim to

have help from God. Can we believe that men capable of teachings of this pre-eminent character would make this claim unless sure it was a true one?

In this way, generally, I reach the conclusion that the Scriptures may be taken as the determinative factor in my theological thought. Next to the Scriptures, accepted from considerations given above and from others which I cannot mention, I rely upon the testimony of moral consciousness. I treat the question of miracles in connection with the two supernatural facts which I regard as established—the supernatural person of Christ and his resurrection. I also seek to get all the help possible from all sources of assured knowledge, by keeping in touch with the best thought of the time.

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My doctrinal convictions followed the traditions of a Christian family, and were one by one corroborated in my experience. When it became my part as a student and a pastor to look into and arrange the contents of these largely inherited beliefs, I made use of the scientific idea of law as an order of facts determined by the nature of the facts. Such an order reveals first the qualities of things, and then their relations. My theological scheme has therefore resulted from what seemed to me the nature of the spiritual realities which were to be studied. So far as their law could be ascertained I have been willing to go; so far as it has remained obscure I dare pretend only to guess; but so far as the nature of a spiritual reality is inscrutable, for reasons which can be given, I decline even to guess, and stand for a Christian agnosticism.

Such a method may seem to threaten right and left. It indeed reconstructs theological expositions and explanations; but, on the whole, it is thoroughly conservative, as it ought to be, unless we admit that the inmost nature of spiritual realities, so far as looked into by Christian people, has always been mistaken.

So long as my beliefs were merely traditional, they included the traditional belief as to the Bible's authority, and accepted the traditional interpretations. After it fell to me to construct a reasoned view of religious truth, the Bible, interpreted by the strict methods of

biblical theology, still seemed to be an exposition of the spiritual realities which have been attested by Christian experience then and now, especially when investigated by the rigorous scrutiny of a scientific conception of law.

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First of all, I believe in God, and am convinced that the light which Jesus Christ has given upon God and the relations in which men stand to him is true light, and that the living God is such a God as Jesus has revealed. This is my fixed point in religion and life, and therefore in theology.

How did I obtain this first conviction? Belief in God is to me the large outcome of life, my own and that of others. Nothing else makes life rational; and that life is rational I am compelled to hold. The Christian belief in God has appearances enough against it, but I am sure that the venture of faith, affirming it, is the most reasonable of acts, since it is the recognition of that which alone can make all reasonable. If this is an honest world, as all our life assumes, then there is a good God in it and over it, and such relations with him as the gospel of Christ proposes and brings to pass are normal relations for us to hold. So I am sure that it is reasonable and right for me to trust that heart of need and aspiration which cries out for the living God and finds him in Christ.

When I have found God as he appears in Christ, I have found my theology. His character is decisive. Not from a text or two, but from the large effect of Jesus Christ and his revealing work, I obtain the vision of God's perfect goodness; and then I know that in theology all is true that follows from that perfect goodness or is harmonious with it, and nothing is true that contradicts it or springs from a lower conception of him. Of whatever is securely grounded in what I may call the Christian character of God I am forever sure, and whatever has no foundation there I cannot hold. It might seem that this one element would determine for me only a small part of theology, but it covers more than one would think. It fixes the moral tone of all theology, and leads to sure thought on all the greatest themes. And what it does determine it determines absolutely, with an authority unparalleled.

In matters that are not governed by the character of God, I have only such convictions as I may be able to obtain, and they are all that I need. The metaphysical aspects of theology are less important than the moral and religious, and if I cannot reach satisfactory conclusions concerning them, I can wait. I do what I can to think the problems through, but my conclusions are at once less certain and less indispensable than in the moral realm. Respecting matters that depend upon historical information the same is true. I must make honest use of facts, and accept what they bring me. Whatever criticism may soundly teach me I will accept, and the testimony of history I will receive as final in its own field. But the great testimony of Jesus Christ concerning God, which is "the master-light of all my seeing," is so plain and self-commending, and has become so inwrought to life and experience, that it cannot be lost, but stands true forever. Therefore I do not expect that my fundamental certainties in theology will be radically changed, in this world or in any other.

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It must be said at once that there is no one single path, to the exclusion of all others, which leads to the goal of theological certainty. In other words, the ascertainment of theological truth is a complex matter. Many processes enter into it. Many sources contribute to it.

One may place the question before himself in several different forms: (1) What was the process by which I gradually matured, through the whole course of my study and experience, my present theological convictions? (2) What is the logical beginning, basis, or root of those convictions as they now stand? (3) In what form and order would I present the various parts of the subject to those whom I might have occasion to instruct with a view to their preparation for the Christian ministry?

Now, the chronological development of beliefs in experience might not, and probably never would, correspond at all closely to the order of pure logic. We form our first religious impression and conviction under the influence of that moral authority which we instinctively accord to our parents and early teachers. We begin as traditionalists. We derive our first belief, as it were, from the

atmosphere by which we are surrounded. Then, as we grow more mature, we reflect on these beliefs and modify and develop them, and this process goes on as long as we continue to grow. When we have fixed and stereotyped all our religious ideas into a final form, that means that we are beyond the capacity for further progress. Now, these traditional impressions and beliefs supply the initial material for all subsequent theological convictions. However much they may be transformed and expanded, it will always remain true that it was with these that we began, and our theological progress will always have a point of connection with our earliest religious ideas and convictions. Of course, this process will vary greatly with different men in differing environments. It may take some such form as this: We are taught what Jesus says, or what will please him—the assumption of our elders being received by us that his words and wishes have special authority or importance; gradually we learn to clothe his sayings with a meaning which is real for us, to associate them with a supreme moral Power, and to test their value in experience. But this development of thought will never start from an abstract logical beginning. We can only analyze it and systematize it logically by reflection afterward.

These suggestions are intended to bear upon the question; How did I arrive at my theological convictions, in point of fact? The answer is: First of all, by an almost passive acquiescence, by early training, influence, atmosphere; then, later, by reflection, by study of history, of nature, of philosophy, by an effort to interpret the fact of Christ, the content of experience, the meaning of history.

But if the question be: How do I now try to give to myself or to others a logical account of my theological convictions, then the order of procedure would be very different. In reflective thought that which is chronologically last is apt to be logically first. The deeper truths of philosophy, its greatest generalizations are, logically, its "first truths." Hence, in giving a logical account of the structure of my beliefs I begin with the reasons for belief in God—the grounds for a spiritual philosophy—and I find a study of these reasons far-reaching, involving a consideration of the interpretation of history and of the meaning and ends of human life.

If the problem be how to present the subject in question to a class,

one may pursue either the more abstract, logical method, or keep closer to the order of experience. I am growing more favorable to the latter plan. In either case, the same problems have to be traversed, and they may be scientifically dealt with on either plan. But in experience we come to know God primarily through Christ. A good method is: Study his life, teaching, person, and in the light of these approach and estimate the various problems of theological speculation.

Respecting the Bible as a source of religious knowledge, I should say that by its use we are brought into contact with a unique revelation of God in human history, and, especially, in the person, teaching, and life-work of Jesus Christ, the consummate Revealer and Interpreter of God. The Bible, therefore, clarifies, extends, and enriches our knowledge of God. But it could not do this for us if we were not religious—that is, kindred to God by nature—and if the idea of God were not native to our minds and hearts. We find in experience that the God whom the Bible reveals and Jesus Christ interprets is congruous—yes, identical—with the God whom we had dimly discerned in nature, and whose authority we had recognized in conscience. Biblical history, the natural order, the moral nature of man—all are witnesses to the same God; all reveal him; all are therefore necessary sources of our knowledge of him.

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I find myself, in my theological thinking, inclined to work more and more directly from the fact of Christ himself—his life, his teachings, and especially his consciousness—as the greatest and most significant fact in the world, and so our best light on living, and our best proof of even the existence of God, in the full Christian sense. The argument goes upon the simple assumption that, if we are ever to discern the real nature either of true living or of the ultimate world-ground, our best light must come from the greatest and most significant facts. For myself, I have no doubt that Christ is the most significant of all facts known to us, and therefore the best basis for direct and decisive inference both as to true life and as to the nature of the world-ground. The argument does not at all go, it should be noticed, upon any assumption of the arbitrary authority of Jesus,

but simply upon the significance of what he is. Any authority subsequently given him must be based wholly upon the fact of what he is in fact found to be. I count the fact of Christ the greatest of all proofs of the completely satisfying God—the proof most powerful to produce conviction in the mind of a man who has come to full moral self-consciousness.

One may argue, similarly (but less decisively, so long as Christ is omitted), from the whole historical revelation of God—from the line of the prophets and from the great spiritual seers of all time—as the greatest and most significant historical movement of the world. Persons are incontrovertibly the greatest facts and the most significant data; and to ignore them is to ignore the most decisive evidences in our search for God and for the secret of living. We are not to suppose that the argument from such personalities is less significant than the argument from things. God is best known in his completest manifestations.

It is just at this point that the surpassing importance of the Bible comes out for me—as the book that puts us in touch with the most significant religious development and the most significant religious personalities of history, culminating in Christ, and so contains the record of the pre-eminent meetings of men with God, of the progressive revelation of God to men. In this progressive revelation, all other stages must be judged by the culmination in Christ. Christ is Lord in the Bible as well as out of it; and its supreme service is its placing us face to face with him. Treated as a book throbbing thus with personal life—as a book of honest testimony to experience, broad and deep, in the moral and spiritual life, and approached through a historical method—I have no doubt that the Bible will increasingly prove what the free critic, Edmond Scherer, claimed:

The Bible will ever be the book of power, the marvelous book, the *book* above all others. It will ever be the light of the mind and the bread of the soul. Neither the superstitions of some nor the irreligious negations of others have been able to do it harm. If there is anything certain in the world, it is that the destinies of the Bible are linked with the destinies of holiness on earth.

I find myself, also, inclined to give increasing weight to that which is rational, not merely in the narrower intellectual sense, but in the broader sense of that which is really worth while, as judged from the point of view of man as a feeling and willing, as well as a thinking, being.

In the study of individual theological problems, I am inclined to use increasingly, as the surest key of interpretation, man's own personal life and his deepest experience in personal relations—feeling sure that that which is nearest and most real and most significant to ourselves must prove the surest key in the interpretation of the deepest in God and in other men.

I aim, therefore, to require of myself, in all my theological statements, that these statements shall be manifestly real, rational, vital; thoroughly ethical, never mechanical; and capable of verification in the honest experience of the individual. And I feel increasingly that the two considerations that must especially move us in coming into the reality, first of religion, and then through religion into reality in our theological thinking, are: first, we must put ourselves persistently in the presence of the great facts of the spiritual world in voluntary surrender to them; especially remembering how inextricably the reality of the spiritual world is bound up in persistent loyalty to the ethical demand; second, we must follow the laws of the spiritual life. This means, it seems to me, that we must persistently fulfil the conditions of a deepening personal relation with God, only being sure that we do not transfer to God the limitations of the finite. The precise conditions of the spiritual life can be so pointed out and fulfilled, and we may count upon the result. Every bit of experience in human relations thus throws light upon the divine. The ethical and religious are bound up together, and all life becomes truly one—a life of learning to love.

I regard as highly important, though supplementary, the light that comes on the inductive side from natural science, including psychology, and from history, and from the attempt of philosophy to think the world through into a true unity. I need hardly say that I have to think of these things as ideals, rather than as accomplished results.

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